


11-22-1980

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Recommended Citation

Smolski, Chester, "Changing Markets Require Different Style of Houses" (1980). *Smolski Texts*. 98.
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text/98

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Changing markets require different style of houses

Chester Smolski

It touches on the heartstrings and evokes a sense of nostalgia: the scene of father and mother sitting near the fireplace with the children playing at their feet. Here it is, the typical family at home, secure, stable, symbolic of the American way of life. But is this picture really accurate?

One of the most noteworthy set of numbers to be issued recently by the U.S. Census Bureau is found in "Household and Family Characteristics: March, 1979," an annual sampling of households done by that agency. It is in family composition that the most striking figures are found.

Of the 77 million households in 1979 (a household refers to persons occupying a housing unit), 74 percent are family, i.e., related to each other in some manner, a reduction from the 81 percent in 1970. A further and more revealing figure is the change in the category of households with children under 18, which dropped from 40 percent in 1970 to only 32 percent in 1979. In fact, among the

several categories used by the Census, only in this family category did a loss occur over the last nine years. That loss amounted to more than one million families.

The explanation for this dramatic change lies, of course, in the reduced birth rates experienced throughout the nation, which last year reached levels below that of the Great Depression of the 30's. In Rhode Island, birth rates are currently close to 20 percent below the national average.

A second reason is the increasing number of nonfamily households, which have jumped from 19 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 1979. Increasingly, young people leave home to establish their own households, greater numbers of divorcees cause people to relocate in other housing units, and larger numbers of elderly live by themselves. Currently, 22 percent of all households in this nation are composed of persons living alone, well up from the 17 percent of 1970. This growing category, people living alone, will profoundly affect the type of housing in the next decade.

This effect is already well illustrated in the revised 1980 Census count of population and housing in Rhode Island. The 945,761 residents of the state repre-

sent a loss of less than one percent from 1970. Yet, while this 10-year population loss of almost 4,000 persons occurred, the number of housing units increased by more than 53,000, or 17 percent!

This dramatic change is illustrated another way: dividing total population by total housing units gives average number of inhabitants per housing unit. In 1970, this number for Rhode Island was 3.0, while in 1980, the figure is 2.5. Although this latter number is subject to slight change because of vacant units, the figure illustrates this major change to smaller households.

Fewer families with children, combined with increasing numbers of people living alone, call for an increasing number of smaller housing units. Smaller units offer the possibility of clustering and attaching such units together, making more efficient use of energy, especially through use of solar power, using smaller amounts of land, and focusing on developments for adults rather than children.

Suburban living is designed for families with children, but with a population increasingly dominated by adults, the nature and location of housing will likely also change from the child-centered suburb to the adult-dominated urban area.

The Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program also projects an older population in the state. By the year 2000, the median age for males will be 36 years and for females 39 years. This is a considerable aging from the 27 and 32 years, respectively, found in 1970.

The trends are decidedly in favor of house types geared to single people, older people, and fewer children-oriented families. The currently overpriced single-family house in the suburbs that so admirably served its purpose for the past generation will likely price itself out of this newly emerging market and perhaps become a relic of the past. In any case, the reduced number of families with children and the lessened need for detached houses in the suburbs may be missed by some, but it does offer opportunities for other types of innovative housing directed to a different and changing market, a market likely found in our built-up urban centers.

The building industry must be cognizant of these demographic trends if it is to meet the needs of this changing house-buying and renting public.

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